

Wîhtikow Feast: Digesting Layers of Memory and Myth
in Highway's *Kiss of the Fur Queen* and McLeod's *Sons of a Lost River*

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Abstract

This paper explores and compares the ways in which novelist and playwright Tomson Highway and visual artist and poet Neal McLeod use traditional and contemporary Cree narratives to represent personal and collective cultural experiences, both past and present. In Highway's novel *Kiss of the Fur Queen*, and in McLeod's exhibition of paintings *Sons of a Lost River*, the mythic figure of the *wihtikow*, a cannibalistic entity that symbolizes the destructive forces of colonialism and urbanization, as well as the self-abusive patterns found within the individual psyche, is used in counterpoint with the Cree trickster *wîsahkecâhk*, elemental spirits like the Thunderbird, and heroes such as *ayash* and *pîkahin okosisa* to express a multi-stylistic array of cultural meanings that avoid absolute interpretations. Highway and McLeod create myths that explore the oppressive as well as the redemptive processes of their cultural heritage over centuries of engagement with colonial powers and institutions.

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Dedications

To my life partner, who teaches me how to live in the moment, and to my five children, who wave to me through the kitchen window when I go out to face the world.

List of Plates

All of the plates in this essay are reproductions of paintings from Neal McLeod's *Sons of a Lost River* exhibition (2008) at the Mendel Art Gallery in Saskatoon, Saskatchewan.

Detail of <i>Wihtikow City</i> , 2003	6
<i>Dreaming Wihtikow</i> , 2002	11
<i>Wihtikow I</i> , 2002	11
<i>Gabriel's Beach</i> , 2008	20
Detail of <i>Pikahin Okosisa</i> , 2008	27

In a lecture entitled *Comparing Mythologies*, Cree novelist and playwright Tomson Highway defines myth as a collection of stories that record the “*spiritual* movements” of a culture across time and space (19). In Highway’s view, mythology establishes cultural solidarity by giving symbolic form to the experiences, both positive and negative, shared by a specific group of people (19). Artist-poet Neal McLeod similarly believes that “Stories are like houses, which give us places to dwell,” and in an experiential sense, they are a “way of coming home” (qtd. in Ring 17)¹. Both Highway and McLeod agree that in order for First Nations individuals and groups to find a sense of physical and spiritual rootedness, especially in regards to their process of healing from the traumas caused by colonization, they must learn to access the myths that shape and define their experiences, both past and present. As artists, Highway and McLeod effectively utilize a variety of mythical elements in their creative work, such as the cannibal monster *wîhtikow*,² the trickster figure *wîsahkecâhk*, the heroes *ayash* and *pîkahin okosisa*,³ and elemental creatures like the Thunderbird and water snake. In this essay, I give particular attention to the *wîhtikow* figure, which is especially prevalent and poignant in Highway’s 1998 novel, *Kiss of the Fur Queen*, and in McLeod’s 2008 exhibition of nine paintings entitled *Sons of a Lost River*, as well as in his first book of poetry *Songs to Kill a Wîhtikow* (2005). On the surface, Highway and McLeod seem primarily to represent the figure of the *wîhtikow* as a negative cultural presence. In *Kiss of the Fur Queen*, the *wîhtikow* is a representation of hunger that

1 All the instances in which McLeod is quoted from Ring are taken from an interview with the artist recorded June 18th, 2008, at the Mendel Art Gallery in Saskatoon, Saskatchewan.

2 In Robert Brightman’s *Ácaoôhkiwina and Ácimôwina: Traditional Narratives of the Rock Cree Indians*, the *wîhtikow* is featured in a number of stories and is described as the “Great-Man,” the “Giant” (31), and the “flesh-eater” (44). There are a variety of spellings of the word: Highway uses Weetigo and McLeod *wîhtikow*. To maintain consistency, I employ the more commonly used contemporary form of the word, *wîhtikow*, unless I am directly quoting a text with a variant spelling.

3 Highway uses the form Weesagechak. Again, to maintain consistency, I use the accepted contemporary spelling *wîsahkecâhk*. As well, I employ Highway’s spelling “Ayash” rather than the variant spellings, *Iyash* and *Ayas*, but in the accepted italicized and lower case form of the word.

figuratively feeds upon the emotional and spiritual attributes of the Okimasis brothers, Jeremiah and Gabriel. In McLeod's work, the *wîhtikow* figure is symbolically representative of the consuming forces of colonization, as well as the more intrinsic "self-destructive" processes that exist within individuals and communities (Ring 11).

My essay explores these oppressive depictions first, but with the understanding that they are merely the top layers of meaning on a multi-layered cultural substratum. I argue that to form an interpretation of both McLeod's and Highway's work one must be willing to actively digest multiple layers of narrative meaning, both constructive and destructive. The middle section of this essay discusses how these artists combine contrasting images and themes in their work, such as collective history and memory, and personal traumas and transformations. Rather than telling stories with explicitly didactic lessons, these artists utilize myths from their cultural past, such as the legends of *ayash* and *pîkahin okosisa*, and recast them into new forms. For instance, in the last section of this paper, I draw connections between the exploits of the *ayash* hero and those of the Okimasis brothers, particularly their encounters with various manifestations of the *wîhtikow*. However, the connections I make are with the understanding that Highway's storytelling is mutable in nature, and undermines any absolute interpretation or analysis. McLeod says that the challenge for Cree artists "is to recover and engage the source of *nêhiyawîwin* (Creeness), which echoes and breathes beneath our collective experience of colonialism" (qtd. in Ring 7). Highway's novel and McLeod's paintings face this challenge by symbolically breathing through the "discordant" and the positive "processes" of their cultural heritage (Sugars 72). Collectively, their multi-stylistic depictions of the *wîhtikow* and the forces that oppose it – *wîsahkecâhk*, *ayash*, and *pîkahin okosisa* – metaphorically express a cultural dance between oppression and empowerment, repression and emergence, and the colonial past and the mythic present.

In an interview in the catalogue for the exhibition at the Mendel Art Gallery in Saskatoon, McLeod talks about his approach to visual storytelling. He says that “the narrative is not so much in front but embedded in the painting” (qtd. in Ring 9). For example, the use of both English and Cree words merged into sections of his paintings allows old and new layers of Cree orality (*nêhiyawêwin*, or “Cree sound”)⁴ – as opposed to a literal translation of languages – to emerge out of his stories (*Cree Narrative* 94). Similarly, about his poetry he says, “[t]he poems, in the moment of creation are spoken performances, are a ‘living line’ of practice embedded with many layers, some older, some deeper, layers being echoed in the present” (qtd. in Gingell). This layered approach to storytelling is also expressed through McLeod’s painting style. In an artist talk at the Mendel Art Gallery, McLeod explained that much of his work is built up with multiple layers of paint and various collaged materials such as canvas, paper, and recycled paintings. He says that some areas of his pieces may be completely repainted multiple times. The overall effect is a pulsating mass of heavily applied brush strokes and acid colours depicting urban-like landscapes with figures buried and entwined within the seething energy of the composition. Many of McLeod’s paintings are executed on sheets of plywood spliced together. He stated that he prefers to work on the floor, where he can explore a wider range of expressive effects with the paint being splashed, dripped and scraped onto the surface. This process also, if he chooses, allows him to amass thick areas of acrylic paint without it dripping and bleeding down the work surface. For McLeod, his methods of layering, both practical and conceptual, allow for the *wîhtikow* and the other mythic elements in his work to act as symbolic reference points for multiple, and many times contradictory, levels of cultural meaning. McLeod says that although

4 For an in-depth discussion about *nêhiyawêwin* in relation to orality in McLeod’s creative practice, see Susan Gingell’s forthcoming paper, “Traditionalizing Modernity and Sound Identity in Neal McLeod’s Writings of the Oral.”

the *wîhtikow* is often depicted as an evil entity, it is in fact “not binary but moves between the dualities” (qtd. in Ring 11). Because of the *wîhtikow*’s ability to traverse paradoxical divides, connections are made between the elements of seemingly opposing worlds: the physical and the spiritual, memory and myth, and past and present.

Like McLeod, Highway layers his stories with mythical elements that evade literal and binary interpretations. In *Kiss of the Fur Queen*, it is ambiguous whether the brothers become *wîhtikow* figures themselves, or whether they are primarily victims of “mastication” (120). In many ways, they embody the insatiable qualities of the *wîhtikow* to the point that they seem to be conscious perpetrators of their own self-consumption. In other ways, they embrace the attributes of the Cree trickster *wîsahkecâhk*⁵ by actively confronting their past experiences of abuse in residential school. Kristina Fagan, in “Weesageechak Meets the Weetigo: Storytelling, Humour, and Trauma in the Fiction of Richard Van Camp, Tomson Highway, and Eden Robinson,” says that “[l]ike Weesageechak entering the Weetigo, and eating him in a Weetigo-like way, the Okimasis brothers try to deal with their abuse by diving into it” (218). In Robert Brightman’s *Âcaoôhkîwina and Âcimôwina: Traditional Narratives of the Rock Cree Indians*, *wîsahkecâhk* is described as a figure that is culturally viewed with “mingled contempt, respect, and affection” because he is believed to be the one who taught First Nations people how to survive in the northern boreal forest, while at the same time he “introduced the knowledge underlying the Euro-Canadian technology brought in by the traders” (64-65). As a symbol, *wîsahkecâhk* is complexly woven into the successes and defeats experienced by First Nations people before and during centuries of colonization. Therefore, it is fitting that in Highway’s novel, *wîsahkecâhk*

5 In “A Note On the Trickster” at the beginning of *Kiss of the Fur Queen*, Highway explains that the Cree Trickster character can “assume any guise he chooses” – “he straddles the consciousness of man and that of God, the Great Spirit” – and that even though he is a “little worse for wear and tear” he is still around to “teach us about the nature and meaning of existence on the planet Earth.”

and the Okimasis brothers, both literally and figuratively enter into the *wîhtikow* and embody its cannibalistic attributes to enable the process of personal and cultural restoration.

For a reader/viewer, the process of interpretively diving into various depictions of cultural oppression may at times be disturbing and uncomfortable – especially considering the range of colonially enforced abuses Highway and McLeod explore – but it is, nonetheless, necessary for one to appreciate the richness and multidimensionality of the myths these artists create. In the paintings of the *Sons of a Lost River* exhibition, McLeod represents the *wîhtikow* as a cannibalistic entity that repeatedly emerges out of the compositions of large-scale mixed media paintings. The backgrounds in McLeod's work present expressively fantastical urban landscapes in which the dismembered body parts of figures, both *wîhtikow* and human, pulsate and dance across the painting surface. McLeod expresses the theme of cannibalism by punctuating his canvases with repeated gestures, and symbolic objects. For example, the *wîhtikow* figures often hold a cross, which is clearly a metaphoric gesture representing the church's role in consuming First Nations cultures. In his artist talk, McLeod suggested that the *wîhtikow* could be described as the Native equivalent of the vampire monster in Western mythology. However, he qualified this comparison by stating that this cannibal figure has a more profound cultural significance: it is a warning for anyone who would allow him or herself to be overcome by greed or hatred. Such a person could potentially become a spirit whose primary intent is to devour the lives of others.

Many of McLeod's paintings transfer these cautionary messages into the viewer's consciousness in unsettling ways. For example, *Wîhtikow City*, 2003 (plate 1) features a wide-ranging array of *wîhtikow* faces sprawled over a city landscape. The faces are either applied heavily with opaque paint or frenetically scrawled with brush marks on dark backgrounds. This painting is visually alarming, not only because of its large size – the work is composed on five



Plate 1: Detail of *Wihtikow City* (2003)

panels of plywood and is 243.8 by 609.6 centimeters in dimension (*Sons* 28) – but also because the viewer identifies with the human aspects of the faces, while at the same time being repelled by their more monstrous and skeletal attributes. Hence, the presence of the *wîhtikow* becomes a tangible reality, not only as an external force of oppression but also implicitly within the viewer's psyche. In the bottom left-hand corner of the piece is a video projection of a short film documentary about urban aboriginal youth by filmmaker Gabriel Yahyahkeekoot, entitled *A Moment of Clarity*. Yahyahkeekoot and McLeod collaborated with this installation in the hopes of activating the “static surface” of the painting with the “moving image” so as to “better document the experience of young people in the city, [and] to awaken people to see the city as a *wîhtikow* that consumes one through poverty, crime, gangs, and violence against women” (Ring 12). In McLeod's work, the *wîhtikow* assumes many forms and symbolizes the destructive patterns both within the individual's psyche and in the larger forces of a collective experience.

In *Kiss of the Fur Queen*, Highway explicitly mentions the *wîhtikow* through a variety of negative descriptions, such as “insatiable man-eater, flesh devourer” (214) and “the monster gnawing at his innards, devouring him live” (252). The first direct instance of this cannibal creature in Highway's narrative is in the residential school, after the Okimasis brothers have experienced the trauma of familial separation and abandonment. Highway utilizes the *wîhtikow* figure as a symbolic force that feeds upon the Okimasis brothers' yearning for physical and emotional sustenance. One of the more prevalent ways the *wîhtikow* figuratively feeds upon the brother's is through sexual gratification. Throughout *Kiss of the Fur Queen*, Highway enmeshes images of mastication and consumption with instances of sexual trauma. For example, Jeremiah can only stand and watch as Father Lafleur, figuratively represented as a *wîhtikow*, sexually abuses his brother during the night at the residential school: “Gabriel was not alone. A dark,

hulking figure hovered over him, like a crow. Visible only in silhouette, for all Jeremiah knew it might have been a bear devouring a honey-comb, or the Weetigo feasting on human flesh” (79). Furthermore, Highway gives a fleeting clue that, like Gabriel, Jeremiah had previously been sexually abused at the hands of Father Lafleur. As he watches the scene, “No, Jeremiah wailed to himself, *please*. Not him again” (79). It is not until the end of Highway’s story that Jeremiah’s suppressed memories come to the surface as he relives in his mind an experience of abuse as an eight-year-old child: “Now he remembers the holy man inside him, the lining of his rectum being torn, the pumping and pumping and pumping, cigar breath billowing somewhere above his cold shaved head” (287). Throughout the novel, the *wîhtikow* is depicted not only as a monster, such as when it takes the guise of Father Lafleur, that sexually devours the brothers’ bodies, but also as a symbolic entity that lives inside of them in the form of repressed traumatic memories. The *wîhtikow* is a powerful metaphor that represents the devastating trauma of sexual abuse, and at the same time, extends beyond boundaries of classification, making multiple and contradictory associations to other consuming acts, from a bear “devouring” honey to the *wîhtikow* actually eating “human flesh” (79).

In other instances in the text, Highway utilizes dream-like prose to express the resonances of unresolved acts of abuse. In the scene in which Jeremiah is spiritually cleansed by the spirit of Chachagathoo, the last Cree medicine woman in the area, the past and present collide into a surrealistic vertigo of ‘undigested’ feelings and memories:

Jeremiah was falling, hurtling through the great womb of space . . .

She was back! To feast on his flesh, devour his soul, her crown, her white fur coat, her eyes of fire. And she was clutching at his throat, squeezing it shut.

Chachagathoo, rising from her grave.

“Get away from me.” Like a two-year-old, Jeremiah sobbed. “Get away, get away, *awus, awus, awus!* . . .

“Leave this body at once!” No. It was the monster gnawing at his innards, devouring him alive, that Chachagathoo had come to get, not him. Except, she wasn’t grimacing now. “Get up! Eeeeeeeeeeeeeee-ha-ha-ha!” (252)

In her essay, “Weetigos and Weasels,” Cynthia Sugars suggests that, in this scene, “Jeremiah’s impulsive denunciation of the Fur Queen as a voracious Weetigo (and/or weasel) is evidence of the self-hatred and violence he has so profoundly internalized. . . . His self loathing reveals itself in his confusion over whether the Weetigo resides within him or whether it exists out there, waiting to pounce on him” (84). The result of his extreme internalization of the past is that the monster “out there” becomes trapped inside his own memories. The distancing Jeremiah has achieved from the negative experiences of his past has only added to the vertigo (“hurtling through the great womb of space”) of encountering them again in the present.

Another negative attribute of the *wihtikow* is its ability to incite people to consume themselves. In Highway’s novel, self mastication is expressed in a number of instances in which the characters are described, either literally or symbolically, as having red or bloody lips: the brothers “devouring ketchup-dripping hamburgers” (120), Willie Joe’s mouth like “a little red cherry” (271), and the Fur Queen’s red lipstick. The communion scenes in the middle of the novel end with Gabriel regurgitating blood as though to suggest that his sexual appetites are self-consuming: “Up the aisle Gabriel bumped and clattered, his mouth spewing blood, his bloated gut regurgitant, his esophagus engorged with entrails” (181). Later in the novel, the brothers turn on each other like two *wihtikows*, which results in Gabriel standing over his brother with “his face smeared bloody” (207). This instance supports Sugars’ suggestion that “[a]s a man-turned-

monster, the weetigo might also represent a critical after-effect of colonialism, for it embodies the ways members of a culture can be induced to turn on their own people” (74).

In McLeod’s paintings, this theme of internalized oppression/consumption is repeatedly represented by a self-devouring *wihtikow* figure, painted with an emaciated face and a gaping and bloody mouth (bloody, according to McLeod in his artist talk, because it is chewed on by the monster’s own teeth). In *Wihtikow II*, which is featured on the front cover of *Songs to Kill a Wihtikow*, a central *wihtikow* figure seems to stare menacingly at the viewer with a blood-stained mouth, while brandishing a crucifix in one hand and a mass of human flesh in the other. In the *Sons of a Lost River* exhibition, *wihtikow* faces emerge out of the compositions, sometimes dominating the visual space and at other times submerged behind other images, as though being ingested by the collaged layers of the paint and canvas. In *Dreaming Wihtikow*, 2003 (plate 2), the central *wihtikow* figure has its arm being chewed on by a face that looks half human and half creature. The predominant colours in the painting range from light peachy oranges to vivid reds, and the aggressive splattering of paint evokes cannibalistic images of flesh and blood being violently gorged on and spewed out. The same visceral effect is displayed in *Wihtikow I*, 2002 (plate 3), in which the composition is a congested mass of fleshy colours, *wihtikow* faces, amputated arms, and vein-like brush patterns that seems to depict a large *wihtikow* in the process of being digested inside the bowels of an even larger entity. Across the surface of the canvas, English words related to the political relationship between First Nations people and colonial institutions are scrawled in capital letters. In “Sons of a Lost River: Historical Memory and the Persistence of Cree World Views in the Paintings of Neal McLeod,” Dan Ring suggests that these phrases, such as “*Regulate[s] our sanctuaries, Legislate[s] our communities*” (plate 3) “indicate the inscription of colonialism on the social and physical body” (12). He argues that the



Plate 2: *Dreaming Wihtikow* (2002)



Plate 3: *Wihtikow I* (2002)

large *wihtikow* figure in this painting is “very specifically an icon for colonialism, as well as a reference to personal and social negativity” (11). Initially, the viewer certainly is arrested by the graphically portrayed effects of colonial oppression. However, there are also restorative elements woven into the painting. As Ring points out, the phrase “*My flesh holds dreaming waters*” offers the “promise of redemption through transformation” (12). As well, the phrase connects to various passages in McLeod’s poetry, such as in “*Wihtikow Skin*” in which the last lines declare “*wihtikow* teeth / could not find feast / in my flesh” (*Songs to Kill* 26). In light of the “redemptive” expressions that emerge out of McLeod’s paintings and poetry, the rest of this discussion will further explore how the narrative meanings beneath the chaotically rendered surfaces of both McLeod’s and Highway’s works pulsate with mythically charged themes of renewal and personal and collective empowerment as the reader/viewer is brought to a new awareness of the otherwise unseen forces, both positive and negative, influencing the lives of First Nations people.

Highway and McLeod consistently and effectively use mythical elements to excavate and give narrative form to the submerged, or un-reconciled, instances of colonial oppression experienced by their cultures. For this reason, I would like to examine further the importance of myth, especially considering the fact that from many North American perspectives the mythical is most often associated with the incredible or the fantastical. In *Comparing Mythologies*, Highway describes the significance of myth for First Nations people:

I am here to talk about mythology because I believe that without mythology, we would be nothing but walking corpses, zombies, mere empty hulks of animal flesh and bone, skin and blood and liquid matter with no purpose, no reason for existing, no use, no point, nothing, mere flesh and bone and skin and blood with

nowhere to go, and with no guide to guide it through a life path that, one imagines, has been given to us all by . . . what? Who? Why? And why here?

These are the questions mythology answers. (18)

From Highway's perspective, the various mythical figures in *Kiss of the Fur Queen* (Fox woman/ Fur Queen, Weetigo, Weesageechak, weasel, Ayash) are integral to answering the questions of place and identity in First Nations' experience. These questions are especially relevant when they relate to repressed cultural experiences that raise queries that do not have rational answers. Although Highway's novel is not a historical exploration of residential schools in the factual sense, his story has profound cultural credibility. In *Magic Weapons: Aboriginal Writers Remaking Community after Residential School*, Sam McKegney suggests that "Euro-Canadian legal definitions of 'truth' and 'fact' [are] contingent on the improbable attainment of 'evidence' . . . [and] [f]or this reason, Highway presents the novel's most crucial incident of abuse as factually uncertain, yet with enormous symbolic and evocative force" (158-159).

Highway uses the tenets of traditional mythology to fabricate a new story with the raw material of contemporary experiences. This powerful use of storytelling to thaw the frozen instances of colonization supports Fagan's assertion that Highway, among other writers, uses "storytelling to explore connections between the traumatic past and troubles in the present and to self-reflexively examine the potential and limits of such indirect . . . communication" (204-205). Later in her article, Fagan recounts the experiences of Rupert Ross, who spent time with Northern Cree communities and listened to their residents' ruminating approach to storytelling:

Over time, I began to see that their recitals of fact, often repeated in a different chronological order, as if being chewed over, revealed an emphasis on certain facts rather than others. It was as if the speaker wanted to say that in his or her view those

particular facts were more significant than others. Invariably, concentration on those emphasized facts led more towards one sort of conclusion than another. . . . They would not, however, give those views directly. Instead, they would recite and subtly emphasize, often only through repetition, the facts that led towards their preferred conclusion. (qtd. in Fagan 211)

Some may believe that one of the limitations of such indirect storytelling is that it fails to offer any tangible or immediate solutions for the dilemmas the stories portray. However, both Highway and McLeod would assert that a more didactic approach to telling stories would only undermine the living and breathing nature of myth by imposing the declarative *this is how!* onto stories that are meant to guide one through the “what? Who? Why? And why here?” (Highway, *Comparing* 18).

In *Kiss of the Fur Queen*, the *wihtikow* is a symbol with a complicated array of indirect meanings and associations. An example of Highway’s sophisticated use of symbolism is in the following scene, where the presence of the *wihtikow* is evoked by the inclusion of mouths and tongues:

Around Gabriel, mouths hung everywhere, mouths with no heads, no bodies, just arms and hands, a hammock of veins and blood that scooped his body up and rocked him and rocked him, like an infant in a cradle, the mouths singing lullabies in tongues that he had never heard. He squirmed himself free of all earthly weight and, naked, bathed in the billow created by the songs. (204)

The disturbing, yet intimate, image of being “rocked” to sleep by disembodied “mouths singing lullabies” in other-worldly languages confirms McLeod’s own thoughts about First Nations writing, in that it strives “to link two disparate narrative locations, and to find a place . . .

wherein the experiences of the present can be understood as a function of the past” (qtd. in Sugars 72). One can also compare the above passage to McLeod’s poem, “Last Kiss,” which evokes the sense of standing at the boundary between two realities: past and present, feeling and senselessness:

distance is like a *wihtikow*
 I stand at the edge of things
 half of my vision
 half of my hearing
 my touch fails
 feels only phantoms (*Songs to Kill* 17)

This idea of existing at the “edge” of two worlds, each one equally available to slip into, is expressed throughout McLeod’s poetry. For both Highway and McLeod, the *wihtikow* is a symbol of “distance,” consumption and dislocation (*Songs to Kill* 17). However, when this symbol is mixed with expressions of longing for personal transformation and for a connection to a more tangible place of cultural existence, the *wihtikow*, as McLeod states, does indeed traverse “binary” divides (qt. in Ring 11).

Throughout Highway’s novel, the constructive and destructive aspects of the *wihtikow* figure are continually enmeshed and manifest through Gabriel’s journey of self-discovery. At times the sweet taste of “honey” is invoked when describing the various sexual encounters Gabriel has with other men: “He snuck a peek at the seven-digit number in his hand, then slipped the little white card into a back pocket. Already, he could taste warm honey dripping” (185). At other times the more negative image of “choking” or “gagging” is used, as when Gabriel expresses his repulsion by the patriarchal structure of Christianity: “This is what they eat, my

mother and father, as they take the body of Christ into their mouths. The essence of maleness. He imagined himself shoving the dead pig foetus whole into his mouth and down his throat. The thought made him gag” (125). Gabriel has strong feelings of revulsion for the tenets of Christianity, while at the same time, he “yearns” for love (“Such yearning as had simmered just beneath the convulsive, near-hysterical hatred had only fuelled Gabriel’s hunger” [166]), and for the release of an inner pain un-reconciled with the experiences of abandonment by his parents and abuse at the hands of Father Lafleur. At other times, the images of honey and gagging are so enmeshed together that the process of being devoured is a montage of attractive sensuality and repulsive engorgement: “And the body of the caribou hunter’s son was eaten, tongues writhing serpent-like around his own. . . . Until, upon the buds that lined his tongue, warm honey flowed like river water over granite” (168-169). Even in the description of the liberating process of Gabriel learning how to dance, Highway mixes the disturbing image of being swallowed into some unseen maw: “‘Think of your pelvis,’ suggested [his mentor] Gregory, ‘as a plate with an offering.’ Flying into yet another grand jeté, Gabriel felt his whole groin area opening, breathing. Suddenly, he felt himself devoured” (200). Gabriel’s sensation of being figuratively eaten is enacted during a moment of physical empowerment. In this light, the *wíhtikow*, as well as being a consuming entity, is a transformative force that enables Gabriel to weave and dance amidst the oppressive elements of his life. Rather than simply representing a direct inversion of the destructive processes of colonization (particularly in regards to Christianity), Highway enmeshes multiple experiences of pain, pleasure, abuse, and “yearning” into a throbbing narrative of personal development.

Similar to Highway, McLeod conflates a wide range of contrasting symbolic elements in his work that represent both empowering and oppressive cultural events. McLeod says in *Cree*

Narrative Memory that “[o]ne of the chief struggles of Cree narrative imagination is the discordance between the ancient memory that is embodied in our lives and our physical being, and the experience of modernity and colonialism. Often, these two sets of narratives and embodied ways of understanding the world have been in conflict” (97). In *Songs to Kill a Wíhtikow*, McLeod responds to this inherent angst in Cree mythmaking by expressing a wide range of conflicting images that combine the sensory realm with the world of dreams, memories, and visions. For example, in “On Wíhtikow Floor” he depicts the past as a *wíhtikow* entity, which is both vividly present and hauntingly absent; it takes the form of repressed memory and dream rising out of the narrator’s body:

dreams, caged images
 loosened every night
 reliving the death of blue sky
 the sky, blackened
 upon the blue
 thunderbirds hollowed
 out the darkness
 upon the water
 to kill the *wíhtikow* snakes
 who covered his body (16)

The many contrasts (“caged” and “loosened”; “reliving the death”) in this passage demonstrates McLeod’s understanding of the nature of stories, which, like memories, are “embodied and reflective” (*Cree Narrative* 95). Stories resurrect elements of a culture – elements such as traditions, values, and spiritual beings – and newly reform them, which results in a myriad of

contrasting themes and values enmeshed into one fluid narrative.

This approach to storytelling is powerfully displayed in McLeod's paintings. For example, the image of the "thunderbirds hollow[ing] / out the darkness / upon the water" in "On Wîhtikow Floor" touches on a prevalent element in McLeod's *Sons of a Lost River* series, in which both the *wîhtikow* and the Thunderbird "appear in counterpoint to historical narratives and oral histories" (Ring 10). An example of this is seen in *Ôtê-nîkân: The Future*, 2008, in which the Thunderbird appears in the centre of the painting to represent the connection between "mythic forces" and "lived history" (Ring 16). In a broad sense, the Thunderbird is an elemental spiritual being of the sky that fights battles between the creatures of other elements, such as the "underwater snake" (Ring 16). McLeod features the bird in his work to invoke the "spiritual and sacred" attributes of his stories and to express in a symbolic way the "transmission of knowledge from spiritual figures," or in a more contemporary Euro-North American sense, "the unconscious" (Ring 16). Interestingly, McLeod states that he rarely paints the Thunderbird in the traditional way (boldly outlined and offset from the rest of the composition), and he "never paint[s] the whole of the Thunderbird, but always leave[s] a bit out," either cropped off the edge of the painting or partly covered over by layers of paint (qtd. in Ring 16). In this way neither the *wîhtikow* nor the Thunderbird has full authority in his work. Both figures perform a perpetual dance in which the *wîhtikow*, as McLeod says, "consumes the light of the sky, and takes away the sound from our collective sound and songs" (qtd. in Ring 17), and the Thunderbird "kill[s] the *wîhtikow* snakes" ("On Wîhtikow" 16). In both his paintings and poetry, McLeod weaves together the traditions and memories of the past and the ideologies and values of the present into a hybrid form of myth that traverses the boundaries of colonially enforced identities.

Water is also a prevalent thematic element in McLeod's work, effectively connecting its

hybrid forms and ideas into a comprehensible narrative flow. As Ring argues, “Flowing water appears substantial but is never the same from moment to moment; it connects events, stories, and people by metaphorically recalling the paradoxical nature of time, always changing yet staying the same” (10). Water imagery is found in many passages in McLeod’s poetry. At the end of his title poem “To Kill a Wihtikow,” water is depicted as a source of new life and as a force to destroy the *wihtikow*: “I passed new earth / through my hands / my dry hands became wet / from your rivers / and *wihtikow* drowned” (28). In the painting *Gabriel’s Beach*, 2008 (plate 4), faces and figures are overwhelmed by swirling applications of paint in various hues of blue and white. The work evokes a sense of despair and trauma as many of the faces seem to be drowning in the aggressively rendered marks and circular swirls that depict the actions of waves and bubbles. The trauma depicted in the painting represents in a broad sense the “overwhelming fear and violence” of war, while it also refers to actual people, such as McLeod’s grandfather, Gabriel Vandall, who died when “landing on Juno Beach on D-Day” (Ring 14). At the same time, though, the painting seethes with life and energy – the brush marks rush off every edge of the painting – and suggests the theme of renewal and continuing growth. This idea of new life is further emphasized by the central figure holding a tightly wrapped baby, which represents a dream that McLeod had of his grandfather holding McLeod in his arms on a war-torn beach. McLeod’s dream is especially poignant considering that Gabriel died four years before his grandson was born (Ring 13-14). Again, it is apparent that McLeod continually traverses boundaries between the past and the present, dream and memory, and between his personal history and the traditional stories of his Cree ancestry.

In the same way that McLeod employs hybrid forms of storytelling across multiple mediums of expression, Highway’s text combines traditional myth and symbolic autobiography,



Plate 4: *Gabriel's Beach* (2008)

creating a meta-narrative that allows for a multitude of thematic strands to connect. A significant example of this connection is Highway's use of the myth of *ayash*, a story, which, like the myths in McLeod's work, utilizes the element of water as both a symbol of renewal and division, and also incorporates the mythical figures of Thunderbird, *wihtikow*, and water snake. There are differing versions of the story which use variant spellings of the hero: *Iyash* (*Legend of Iyash*, *Story of Isash*), *Ayas* (Brightman). There is a central parallel between the composite versions of the traditional *ayash* legend and Highway's story of the Okimasis brothers. Both stories begin with an experience of familial displacement, which then sends the hero(es) on a journey encountering various manifestations of human cannibals, returning full circle to the source of original abandonment to experience a form of reconciliation (*Legend of Iyash*).

In some versions of the legend, *ayash* is wrongfully accused of sexually violating his stepmother. In punishment, *ayash*'s father, *ayash* senior, travels with his son by boat to a secluded island and abandons him there indefinitely. *ayash* is eventually rescued by a giant serpent which, depending on the version of the story, is either depicted as simplistically evil (*Story of Iyash*), or, like Highway's Fur Queen, another manifestation of the Fox Woman figure (*Legend of Iyash*). In a version of the *ayash* story retold by Cree elder Caroline Dumas, the snake is the hero's *kôhkom* (grandmother) in spirit form, who instructs *ayash*: "You're going to sit on top of my back and I'll take you across the lake" (Brightman 105). As they cross the water, *ayash* withholds information about an approaching, and murderous, Thunderbird so the snake will not turn back before they reach the shore; the Thunderbird destroys the serpent just as *ayash* reaches the land in safety (*Story of Iyash*). In Dumas' version, the act of treachery enacted on the serpent by *ayash* must be remedied. Therefore, he retrieves the serpent/Fox Woman's blood in baskets and puts them inside a tree so that she can live again (Brightman 106). To thank the hero

for rejuvenating her, Fox Woman helps *ayash* on his journey by bestowing magical gifts that help him survive subsequent encounters with the blood-thirsty cannibal people: an old man who feeds his guests infected pieces of his flesh, sisters who eat people with their vaginas, and blind cannibals with elbows that cut like knives (*Legend of Iyash*). In every encounter, *ayash* is able to outwit the cannibal monsters and restore them to their original human forms. When *ayash* finally returns home again, he enacts another restorative remedy upon his family which, in one version, results in reconciliation with all family members: “His mother came outside and saw him. She rejoiced and Iyash was also very happy to be home and to see his mother. Then his father came out and was surprised to see him. The older Iyash and the younger Iyash then talked and everything was back to like it was before” (*Story of Iyash*). In an alternate version, “Iyash the elder and his young wife were . . . quickly consumed by . . . raging fire” and the world is created anew in the fire (*Legend of Iyash*).

In connecting the *ayash* legend to *Kiss of the Fur Queen*, McKegney argues that “Jeremiah’s development,” in particular, “is symbolically articulated through the mythic struggle between the heroic Son of Ayash and the dreaded Weetigo, a process the protagonist can only understand and master when he becomes a teller of tales himself” (“Claiming Native Narrative Control” 69). Gabriel and Jeremiah work as a composite *ayash* pair, weaving through, and dancing with, the various *wihtikow* manifestations in the novel. Highway refers to the story of *ayash* in a few places that involve each of the brothers in different ways. There are two instances in which their father, Abraham Okimasis, recounts a part of the legend: one on his deathbed when he shouts “[m]y son.’ . . . ‘The world has become too evil. With these magic weapons, make a new world,’ said the mother to the hero, the Son of Ayash” (227), and one in a memory Jeremiah has of his father telling the story to him on a boat when he was nine: “*eehee, Ayash*

oogoosisa had to go out into the world at a very young age . . . ” (274) There are also places in the text that depict a performance of the story: one in which Gabriel practices performing the role of *ayash* for a play that Jeremiah has written (279), and one in which Jeremiah orally performs the legend to children (271). All of the passages referred to above demonstrate active forms of storytelling encased within the story of the novel. Through these meta-narratives, the reader instinctively makes connections between the mythic figures enacted and those enacting them. Gabriel and Jeremiah are both literal and symbolic representatives of *ayash* who find empowering paths in their lives, particularly through the various art forms they develop. However, their paths must also delve into “the dark place[s] of the human soul where [they] will meet evil creatures like . . . the Weetigo” (271).

There are a number of symbolic instances of *wihtikow* encounters in *Kiss of the Fur Queen* that parallel the exploits of *ayash*. For example, Gabriel’s first experience with the food court in Winnipeg’s urban environment figuratively represents the insatiability of the *wihtikow*-like culture of consumerism:

The world was one great, gaping mouth, devouring ketchup-dripping hamburgers, french fries glistening with grease, hot dogs, chicken chop suey, spaghetti with meatballs, Cheezies, Coca-Cola, root beer, 7-Up, ice cream, roast beef, mashed potatoes, and more hamburgers, french fries. . . . The roar of mastication drowned out all other sound. (120)

In this scene, Gabriel and Jeremiah are bombarded by a sensory overload of consumption. Because they are hungry, they are compelled to join in the frenzy of mastication much in the same way that *ayash* in the traditional legend is seduced by the old man to eat pieces of his rotting flesh and by Fox Woman to eat more than he wants or needs (*Legend of Iyash*). In the

traditional story, *ayash* eats the old man's food, but does not become sick because he has been given protective powers by Fox Woman to overcome its effects (*Legend of Iyash*). In Highway's story, the brothers completely give in to their temptations and become engulfed by the *wihtikow* spirit of consumerism, which is "so potent that, before the clock struck two, the brothers were gnawing away with the mob" (120).

Interestingly, during these encounters with the urban environment, which is like a kaleidoscope of brand-name products and retail shops, the brothers recount another myth about *wisahkecâhk* as weasel encountering the *wihtikow*:

Jeremiah . . . was wrestling with visions of his own. "Remember Aunt Black-eyed Susan's story . . . about the weasel's new fur coat?" . . .

"You mean where Weesageechak comes down to Earth disguised as a weasel . . . [a]nd the weasel crawls up the Weetigo's bumhole?" . . .

"Yes. . . . In order to kill the horrible monster. . . . And comes back with his white fur coat covered with shit?" (118)

Sugars suggests that in these scenes the *wihtikow* and weasel figures are enmeshed with the underlying metaphor of the "harrowing quest for self-knowledge" in the "entrails" of the urban environment: "For in a sense, they [Jeremiah and Gabriel] will both, in different ways, feast on its temptations, while also being consumed alive by its implacable greed" (78,80). As Fagan explains, Gabriel indulges in the *wihtikow* cravings of the city "by willingly entering into a world of promiscuity and sexual self-abuse that eventually leads to his death," and "Jeremiah immerses himself in school, classical music, religion, abusive sexuality . . . and the desire to be white" (218). In one sense, their suppressed experiences of victimization have been transformed into a congealed mass of self-deprecation and a willing consumption of colonizing paradigms.

However, through this process the brothers also develop an ability to articulate their stories in a way they never would have been able to otherwise. At the end of Highway's narrative, Jeremiah is able to tell the stories of *ayash* and the *wîhtikow* in an empowering way because he and his brother have, in various parts of their lives, embodied the *wîhtikow*, or like *wîsahkecâhk*, have "crawl[ed] up . . . [its] bumhole" and back out again (*Kiss of the Fur* 118).

At the end of the novel, Jeremiah's "embodied" memories come back literally to bite him in the groin (*Cree Narrative* 97). After the scene in which he recounts the story of *ayash* to the children, Jeremiah encounters a young boy (Willie Joe) who reveals his experiences of sexual abuse in an unsettlingly intimate manner. Willie Joe asks, "'What's . . . what's a . . . a Weetigo?'" (ellipses in original) and when Jeremiah replies that "A Weetigo is a monster who eats little boys . . . like you," Willie Joe "jumped on Jeremiah, the rope-like arms wrapped around his waist, the hot face buried in his groin. 'A Weetigo ate me,' the child mumbled into the faded blue denim. And then bit" (271). Jeremiah's physical reaction to Willie Joe is significant ("He had a raging hard-on"), for it solidifies the idea that the past and present are always intertwined (271). Jeremiah can never really disengage from the experiences of abuse in his own past, but he has the choice of whether to perpetuate them in the present. As a storyteller, he is acknowledging the "dark place of the human soul" while infusing a sense of empowerment into the hearts of his listeners (271). Essentially, his life story carries the same message as the traditional *ayash* legend that, regardless of one's experience, one has the ability to face and outwit the potential self-consuming *wîhtikow* by both challenging and embodying its presence.

Although Gabriel ultimately dies of AIDS, in a number of instances throughout the story he enacts his own form of personal empowerment, which parallels the exploits of *ayash*. For example, Gabriel impulsively laughs during the communion "meal" he takes with Jeremiah in

the middle of the novel: “But the instant the flesh met Gabriel’s, a laugh exploded where his ‘Amen’ should have been. . . . The priest turned pale but soldiered on; a dozen more diners were waiting, screaming with hunger” (181). Sugars attests that this scene is a crucial anti-colonial gesture “for it represents Gabriel’s refusal, once and for all, to accept the cannibalizing discourse of Christianity that has consumed his life thus far” (78). In fact, both Gabriel and Jeremiah demonstrate this “anti-colonial” impulse in empowering and disabling ways. The brothers are like *ayash*: they journey in a full circle from an initial dislocation from the stories and places of their personal and ancestral roots, through experiences caused and influenced by the *wîhtikow*-like forces of colonialism, and back into what McLeod calls a “process of ‘being at home’ in stories” (qtd. in Ring 17).

In the same way that Highway entwines the *ayash* story with a more personally inspired myth about two brothers, McLeod also weaves together traditional myths with stories mined from his own ancestral past. He says that his “work is profoundly grounded in the old stories. I have found great inspiration from these old narratives, and they form the structure through which I make sense of the world, to imagine new characters, and new situations” (qtd. in Gingell). A powerful example of this conflation of myth and memory is seen in the painting *Pîkahin Okosisa*, 2008 (plate 5), which depicts the story of the resurrected man *pîkahin okosisa* over five connected panels. Like other larger pieces in the *Sons of a Lost River* exhibition, the panels of *Pîkahin Okosisa* are propped up against the wall. When a viewer stands in front of them they extend past the boundaries of periphery vision so that the onlooker feels completely engulfed by the imagery of the piece. This encounter of being visually enveloped by a story parallels the way McLeod talks about his experience with the myth, an experience which spans “many years” of “gathering the details of it” and involving multiple “meanings” and “layers of understanding”

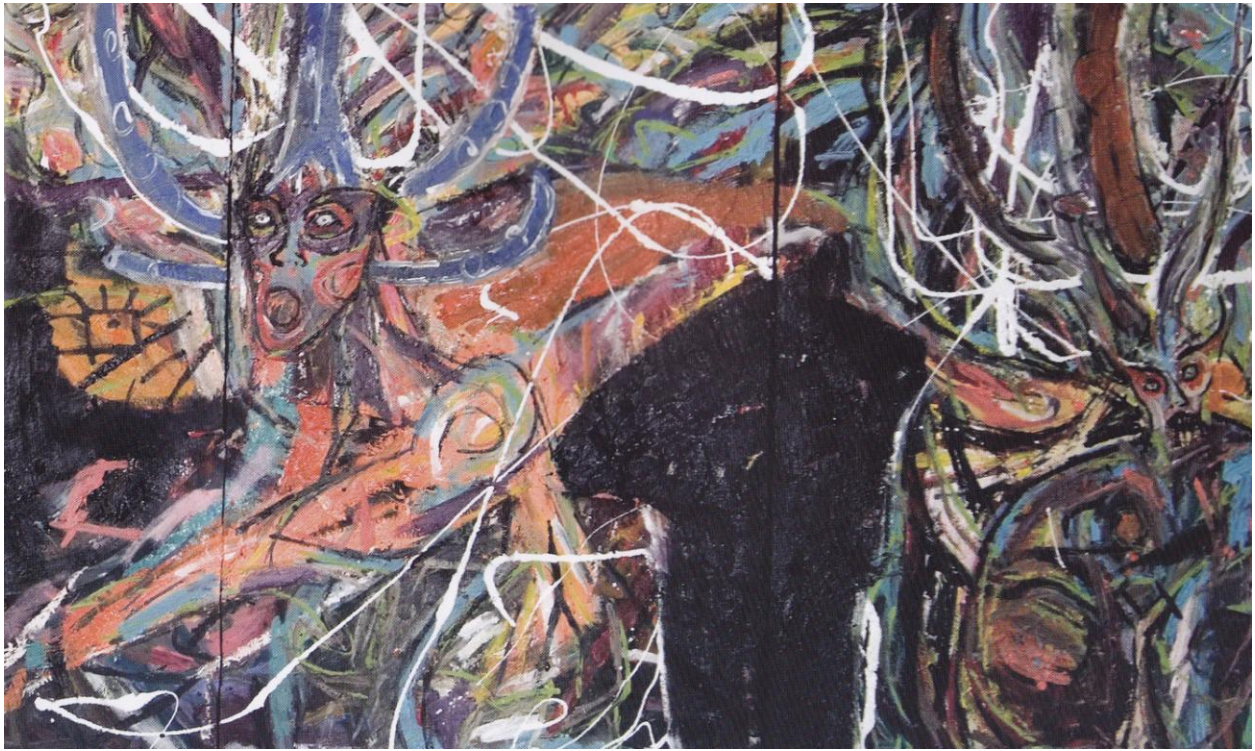


Plate 5: Detail of *Píkahin Okosisa* (2008)

(*Cree Narrative* 72). In chapter seven of *Cree Narrative Memory*, McLeod explains that the original story of *pîkahin okosisa* took place where he grew up, on James Smith First Nation. The narrative details were passed down through many generations, starting from McLeod's "great-great-great grandmother" and augmented by other storytellers on the same First Nation (71). The story, as McLeod's father, Jerry McLeod, told it to him begins with a "large flood on Sugar Island [*sôkâw-ministik*]" in which "many people died" (73). One of the people who was thought by the community to be dead, and who had already been prepared in burial clothes, was a man named *pîkahin okosisa*. The story is that during the wake the left side of his body became warm and he resurrected back to life. His body transfigured into a spiritual being that flew across the sky and saw visions of the future. He acted as a bearer of omens to the people who survived the flood and had moved to James Smith First Nation, about upcoming wars, violence, and disease due to the effects of industrialization and urbanization. McLeod's poem, "Pîkahin Okosisa," describes how the hero of the story "passed through time / merged the future into the present" (*Songs to Kill* 87). At the end of every day, *pîkahin okosisa* returned from his flight across the sky and would land on a different spot on the ground to sleep. It was the people's responsibility to move his teepee to the spot where he landed so that he would have a place to sleep in every night (*Cree Narrative* 73-74). Interestingly, it seems to be through the fugitive nature of *pîkahin okosisa* that the Cree people he serves are kept prepared for the dangers they will face. However, this means they must be willing to accept change and not expect their hero to appear at the same time and place. As Ring suggests, the *pîkahin okosisa* story is "essentially about dislocation and changing time" and, in the same way, McLeod's painting itself is "process-oriented" (15). Therefore, the "physical process of painting mirrors a content of layered tales" that perpetually breathes and transforms and allows for a multitude of interpretations to form (Ring 15).

McLeod's painted version of the story depicts the figure of *pîkahin okosisa* as a dismembered head painted three times in a sequential pattern of movement across the top of the painting. All of the heads are depicted with open mouths and streaks of blue streaming out in all directions. Their alarming mask-like appearance resembles a *wîhtikow*. However, their mouths are without teeth, which suggest that they represent an inversion of the *wîhtikow*'s consuming force. Unlike other paintings in the exhibition in which the *wîhtikow* figure is front and center, the two *wîhtikow* figures in *Pîkahin Okosisa* are subordinately contained within the panels on opposite ends of the piece as though exiled to the furthest limits of the viewer's periphery awareness.

Overall, McLeod's *Pîkahin Okosisa* visually incites a complex array of feelings and associations in the viewer, who will undoubtedly make thematic and aesthetic connections to the surrounding paintings in the exhibition. For example, the prominent blue swirls of paint throughout the composition of the piece echo the theme of renewal found in paintings like *Gabriel's Beach*, and the disjointed arrangement between sections of violent splatters and strokes and areas of black negative space mirrors the discordant energy seen in pieces like *Wîhtikow City* and *Queen City Makes Bones of Old Memories*. Therefore, as a whole, the paintings in *Sons of a Lost River* bring together themes of physical dismemberment and death, with those of spiritual quests and awakenings. Like Highway's recycled *ayash* story, McLeod's visual retelling of stories such as the *pîkahin okosisa* legend intricately weaves the myriad details of personal and collective stories into a vibrant montage of trauma, violence, renewal, and hope.

As this discussion demonstrates, contemporary First Nation myths that unearth the complexities of cross-cultural experiences, both past and present, certainly do not offer any direct or explicit lessons. Due to the juxtaposition of contrasting images that Highway and

McLeod execute in their work, the figure of the *wîhtikow*, in particular, may be an ambiguous one, and the *wîhtikow* itself may avoid answering the question called out to it in *Kiss of the Fur Queen* when Gabriel is dying: “Haven’t you feasted on enough human flesh while we lie here with nothing but our tongues to chew on?” (294). This question is equally relevant for the *wîhtikow* that resides within each of the Okimasis brothers. Like the Fur Queen, the brothers are shape shifters who traverse the boundaries of oppression by simultaneously challenging and personifying the qualities of the *wîhtikow* and *ayash*. McKegney suggests that “Jeremiah retains the power to determine whether or not he will give in to his base desires, nourished in the abusive environs of Residential School, and perpetuate the cycle of violence, or whether he will work towards his own healing. . . . It is he who ultimately must decide whether he will become the Weetigo or the Son of Ayash” (“Claiming Native Narrative Control” 73). However, both Jeremiah and Gabriel are unique versions of *wîhtikow* and *ayash* woven into one composite figure. Each brother is as inseparable from the other as the past is from the present. McLeod’s work evokes this same sense of existing in multiple realities at once – past and present, feeling and senselessness – as it powerfully depicts both cultures and individuals attempting to “stand at the edge of things” and “struggle to keep [their] souls” (“Last Kiss,” *Songs to Kill* 17). The inherent incomprehensibility of this multi-layered process of storytelling through centuries of lived experiences requires the elements of myth to bring clarity and cohesion to the surfaces of cultural consciousness. The strength of Highway’s and McLeod’s depiction of the *wîhtikow* figure is in the enmeshment of the positive and the negative, of the deformed and the beautiful, of human depravity and potential. This devouring monster represents the inevitable results of colonization, and is another manifestation of *wîsahkecâhk*, who shows that if you crawl up a “bumhole” (*Kiss* 118) you will come out a little soiled, but what a story you will have to tell!

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